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US security council unleashed

Role under Reagan departs from historical models

By George D. Moffett III
Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor

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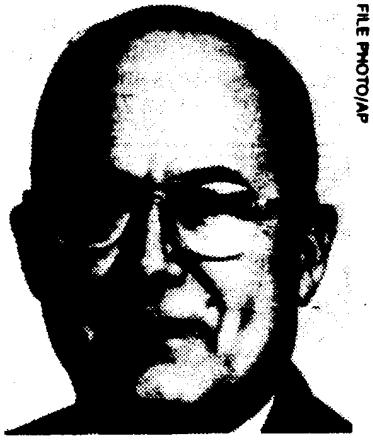
The National Security Council is under a cloud.

In the wake of disclosures that the White House agency negotiated a controversial arms-for-hostages deal with Iran, the role of the NSC has fallen under close scrutiny. The deal was apparently cemented over the objections of Secretary of State George Shultz and Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger and without the knowledge of Congress.

Adding to the NSC's difficulties are reports that NSC officials have been involved in supplying arms to antigovernment rebels in Nicaragua and waging a secret disinformation campaign against Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi.

Experts say that since at least the Nixon administration the NSC has been used to conduct secret diplomacy, sometimes without the full knowledge of the secretary of state.

What may be unprecedented in the present Iran case is the extent to which the activities of the NSC are out of step with the stated policy of the administration. Reagan officials have long held that the US should not negotiate with terrorists and, for fear of tipping the balance in the six-year Iran-Iraq war, should not act as a conduit for arms to Iran.



FILE PHOTO/AP

Poindexter is emerging from the White House shadows

"The NSC's preoccupation with getting the prisoners out has defeated our own [strategic] purposes," says a State Department official who criticized the NSC's determination to proceed without the backing of the State and Defense Departments. "Either you do these things in such a way as to enhance your [larger] objectives or in such a way as to compromise yourself."

Also new may be the extent to which the Reagan administration has used the NSC to run intelligence operations independently of the CIA, possibly in violation of US law.

Congressional committees will be looking into the possibility that the NSC violated provisions of the Arms Export Control Act and of a 1979 executive order barring arms shipments to Iran. Congress is also investigating possible violations of a 1983 congressional funding authorization following reports that an NSC staff member, Lt. Col. Oliver North, provided assistance to Nicaraguan rebels after aid to the contras was cut off by Congress.

"There's nothing new in using the NSC as an implementer of policy," says Barry Rubin, author of a recent book on foreign-policy making entitled "Secrets of State." "Moreover, past secretaries [of state] have resented not being kept fully informed. But the main issue here is that Shultz was put in a position of representing one position to the allies while the White House and NSC were apparently following a contradictory policy."

Former national-security adviser McGeorge Bundy says that during his tenure under Presidents Kennedy and Johnson "there were no policy activities that weren't known to and cleared with the secretary of state. Cutting out the State Department would be a formula for real incoherence."

When the NSC was established under President Truman in 1947, it was seen principally as a coordinating mechanism, a forum where the differing views of the various agencies involved in foreign-policy making – including the White House and the State and Defense Departments – could be reconciled.

In practice the influence of the NSC has varied according to the style of individual presidents. Presidents with a strong interest in hands-on management of foreign policy like Kennedy, Nixon, and, to a lesser extent, Carter have relied on strong national-security advisers to exercise tight control over foreign policy.

But other presidents have tended to delegate authority to strong secretaries of state (Eisenhower and John Foster Dulles, Ford and Henry Kissinger), weakening the authority of the NSC.

Under President Reagan, the pattern has been mixed. Reagan's first secretary of state, Alexander

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Haig, staked out a role as "vicar" of US foreign policy, while the national-security adviser was demoted to a role subordinate to the White House chief of staff.

But Mr. Haig's confrontational style, combined with growing policy disagreements between the White House and State Department, shifted the policymaking center of gravity back toward the White House.

Today Secretary of State George Shultz is widely regarded as the first among equals on a Reagan foreign policy team that includes Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger, Central Intelligence Agency Director William Casey and the national-security adviser, Adm. John Poindexter.

But recent news reports that put the NSC at the center of three major operations – the Iran hostage deal, the Libyan disinformation plan, and alleged secret aid to the Nicaraguan contras – have prompted analysts to upgrade their estimates of Admiral Poindexter's role.

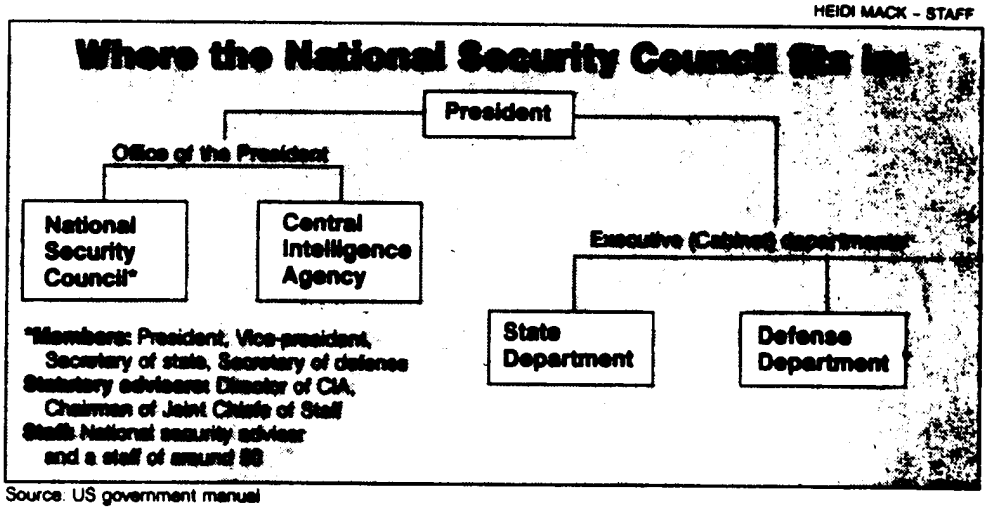
Not all analysts fault the administration for attempting to negotiate a deal with Iran to secure the release of US hostages held by pro-Iranian groups in Lebanon.

Former Secretary of State Dean Rusk recalls that after the Bay of Pigs crisis in 1961, he sent pharmaceutical supplies to Fidel Castro in order to free the US-backed troops that had tried to land on Cuba.

But many diplomatic observers see a vast difference between a trade-off involving humanitarian supplies and the provision of spare parts for US-made equipment used by Iran in its war with Iraq.

"It is hard to imagine [another] issue like this that has not only tactical but strategic implications for the whole region," says another former national-security adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski.

HEIDI MACK - STAFF



Source: US government manual